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Walls will talk at public housing museum

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It's a good thing Keith Magee is a man of faith. His job is to help raise \$13 million in the next year and a half to open a museum dedicated to the history and the people of public housing.

I confess that when I first heard about the project I was skeptical. These are tough times, and the memory of public housing -- at least in Chicago -- might better be buried rather than put on display in a shiny new museum.

Before most were torn down in recent years, the high-rises of the Chicago Housing Authority were often little more than vertical reservations, built and maintained to keep poor people of color out of white and middle-class neighborhoods.

But after listening for just a few minutes to Magee -- a Harvard Divinity School-trained minister -- talk about the plans and potential of the National Public Housing Museum and Education Center, scheduled to open in 2012, I felt my skepticism peeling away and my hand reaching for my wallet.

Lucky for me, it was empty that day.

"The stories of the people who lived in public housing shouldn't disappear with the buildings," he told me. "Their lives count. They have value. They are part of the story of America."

The museum will include exhibits and oral histories from public housing developments, ranging from Cabrini-Green to Robert Taylor, California to New York, where poor immigrant families from Europe, Puerto Rico and the American South often found a clean and solid foothold on their way up and out of poverty.

"We want to look at the lives of every race and ethnic group that has come to realize the promise of America through public housing," Magee said.

Magee, the museum's executive director, wanted me to see the vision for myself. He led me through the dank darkness of an abandoned building at 1322 W. Taylor -- the future site of the museum.

"Watch your step," he said as we walked into an empty 550-square-foot shell of an apartment with a gaping hole in the wall on the second floor of the building, the last of what used to be the Jane Addams Homes.

Jane Addams Homes was one of the city's first public housing developments when it opened in 1937. In the beginning, most of its residents were white. In the end, when it closed in 2002, almost all of its residents were black.

The plan is to turn this second-floor apartment and six others into replicas of different public housing apartments, each unit representing a different decade.

There might be a desk in the living room of one of the replica apartments that once belonged to a girl named Sonia Sotomayor who lived in a housing project in the Bronx and grew up to become a justice on the U.S. Supreme Court. Or there might be a twin bed that a boy named Marshall Hatch dreamed on when he lived in the Jane Addams Homes before becoming a prominent Chicago minister and activist.

"The stories of the people will be more important than the objects," Magee said. "This museum is about making the walls talk."

The day after touring the museum site, I watched a herd of heavy machines tear into a building at the Harold Ickes Homes on South State Street.

As I stood on the sidewalk, a woman who has lived in the development for 35 years walked by.

She lives in one of the last buildings standing. It is scheduled to be torn down next year, she told me.

"I hate seeing this," she said. "This is our home. This is our memories."

I asked her what she thought of a museum about public housing.

"I think it's a great idea," she said. "It lets people know our history, that we were here, you know, like the Indians used to be."

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